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United Nations information centres in 1998: allocation of resources from the regular budget of the United Nations

Report of the Secretary-General

I. Introduction

1. An important objective of the reorientation of public information activities is to strengthen the capacity of the Organization to communicate, globally and at the country level, the relevance and success of its work in meeting the challenges of today and of the new millennium. This was also the view of the Secretary-General's 1997 Task Force on the Reorientation of United Nations Public Information Activities, which noted that successful implementation of this objective depended on "more effective central management capacity, a high degree of delegation to adequately resourced country-level communications programmes, and a significantly strengthened two-way flow of communication" (see A/51/950, para. 260 (b)).

2. In meeting the strategic communications priorities of the Organization, the Department of Public Information has re-evaluated its existing communications arrangements. In doing so, it has reaffirmed the unique functions performed by the global network of United Nations information centres in the Organization's communications and public information strategies.

3. In paragraph 25 of its resolution 53/59 B of 3 December 1998, the General Assembly called upon the Secretary-General "to continue to study ways and means of rationalizing and effecting equitable disbursement of available resources to all United Nations information centres and to report thereon to the Committee on Information at its twenty-first session".

4. The present report, prepared in response to the General Assembly's request, includes information on major activities of the 62 United Nations information centres operating in 1998; ongoing efforts to strengthen the information centres; and the resources available for the operation of the information centres. The report does not include information on the work of United Nations information services in Geneva and Vienna, whose budgetary allocations are identified separately under section 26 of the programme budget for the 1998-1999 biennium (public information); nor does the report deal with the information services of the regional commissions, which operate within the administrative and budgetary mandates of each commission.

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II. Functions performed by information centres

5. The United Nations information centres promote greater public understanding of the work of the United Nations through activities that would raise awareness of priority issues for the Organization, major conferences, special events and observances, and reach the widest possible sectors of civil society. They maintain close working relationships with the local media, develop partnerships with non-governmental organizations to broaden their information campaigns, and cooperate with local educators in developing curricula for teaching about the United Nations. Some information centres have supplemented information outreach activities during the past year with the creation, where feasible, of local-language Web sites, which often resulted in an increase in the number of queries and visitors to centre libraries. While only 38 United Nations information centres used electronic mail in 1995, today almost all centres, along with United Nations information services and United Nations offices, use improved electronic communications systems. All centres have been equipped with modern data-processing and office equipment, improving their capacity both to produce local-language products and to disseminate information directly and through local redisseminators.

6. United Nations information centres continued to keep the Secretariat informed of local public opinion and media coverage of the United Nations activities, and responded to misperceptions about the United Nations when they arose in the local media. In addition to assisting the Secretary-General or the Deputy Secretary-General in their official travel, information centres also provided logistical assistance to United Nations system partners, arranging for press conferences and media contacts for visiting senior officials, launching major reports or information campaigns and providing other types of assistance to various United Nations departments and offices, including arrangements for recruitment examinations.

7. The report of the Secretary-General on the evaluation of the United Nations information centres,[1] submitted to the Committee on Information at its nineteenth session in 1997, confirmed the role of United Nations information centres as local focal points for information emanating from the United Nations system as a whole. Based on a comprehensive background review and an extensive field survey, the report concluded, among other things, that information centres play a key role in engaging and supporting non-governmental organizations and other local organizations in community-based activities aimed at highlighting United Nations themes, and that "by virtue of their close contact with the community and their knowledge of local interests and trends, United Nations information centres ha[d] a unique capability to tailor and deliver the United Nations message with maximum impact" (see A/AC.198/1997/6, para. 50). The survey also found that the use of new communications technology had not diminished, but rather increased, the demand for their services, as the centres were able to "customize, package and provide hands-on assistance to individuals and organizations" (see A/AC.198/1997/6, para. 49).

III. Highlights of centre activities in 1998

8. The role of United Nations information centres as communicators and catalysts was particularly evident in the range and depth of activities that they carried out throughout 1998, the fiftieth anniversary year of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In addition to all priority issues on the United Nations agenda, the information centres actively publicized the special session of the General Assembly devoted to countering the world drug problem together, the United Nations Diplomatic Conference of Plenipotentiaries on the Establishment of an International Criminal Court and the World Conference of Ministers Responsible for Youth, held in Portugal. These activities in all parts of the world contributed to stimulating local interest in global issues, encouraging debate and underscoring the role of the United Nations in providing an international forum for dialogue and cooperation.

9. Throughout the fiftieth anniversary year of the Universal Declaration, United Nations information centres conducted many successful public outreach programmes by joining forces with all segments of society to publicize the achievements of the United Nations in the field of human rights and to raise awareness of the need for further action. In addition to having the Universal Declaration translated into 55 local languages, the centres organized seminars, public rallies, exhibits and a variety of imaginative activities under the theme of "All human rights for all".

10. At the initiative of the United Nations Information Centre in Rome, a year-long worldwide advocacy programme was undertaken in cooperation with a major clothing company. The campaign featured the fiftieth anniversary logo, with the text of articles from the Universal Declaration reproduced on billboards and posters as well as in television, newspaper and magazine advertisements. It is

estimated that this campaign reached some 480 million people in 60 countries with the support of information centres in Buenos Aires, Mexico City and Paris, as well as the United Nations Information Service in Vienna. The United Nations Information Centre in Athens initiated a far-reaching campaign for a nationwide brochure competition based on the Universal Declaration, involving businesses, schools, non-governmental organizations and Government offices. Participants were asked to print and distribute at least 1,000 copies of their brochures, featuring the Universal Declaration and the fiftieth anniversary logo. As a result, some 45,000 copies were distributed in the country.

11. Throughout the year, the information centres also cooperated with schools, educators and student groups to develop educational programmes and human rights curricula. Younger students were involved in activities designed to present the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in an easy-to-understand format, often including drawing competitions, question-and-answer sessions and special projects. The United Nations Information Centre in Mexico City helped a group of local college students to launch a project involving a series of briefings for some 3,000 elementary school children in the capital. The United Nations Information Centre in Lima, through its "Friends of the United Nations School Clubs", organized educational activities for hundreds more. Older students took part in model United Nations conferences, quiz programmes, poster and slogan competitions and debates. Several information centres, including those in Asunción, Colombo, Lima, Lagos, Madrid, New Delhi, Panama City, Paris and Warsaw, carried out national student essay and poster contests. Others, such as the centres in Kathmandu and Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, and the United Nations Office in Uzbekistan, held other local contests.

12. Many useful educational information products were developed by United Nations information centres and local partners. The United Nations Information Centre in Buenos Aires launched an interactive educational programme for use in elementary, intermediate and high school classrooms. The four-diskette kit was developed by the Centre and the Organization of Argentine Youth and co-financed by two corporate sponsors. The United Nations Information Centre in Copenhagen, in cooperation with the Government of Denmark, the United Nations Association and the Danish Centre for Human Rights, produced an educational CD-ROM containing the text of the Universal Declaration and animated games.

13. The information centres and non-governmental organizations were also successful in bringing thousands of people together to show their support for human rights and the United Nations. Activities included torchlight processions and marches in many countries, including Argentina, Bangladesh, Bolivia, Denmark, Italy, the Philippines, Trinidad and Tobago and Zimbabwe. Sporting and cultural events, seminars and public debates organized by the information centres also sparked widespread interest in the fiftieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration. For example, some 45,000 people attended a rock music concert organized by the United Nations Information Centre in Santa Fé de Bogota, while some 36,000 people took part in a two-day human rights festival in Japan, co-sponsored by the United Nations Information Centre in Tokyo and the municipal government. Other information centres, including those in Cairo, Dakar, Harare, Maseru, Nairobi and Rabat, organized human rights events on behalf of organizations in the United Nations system represented in their country.

14. Centres in Bucharest, Lima, Rabat and United Nations offices in Belarus and Uzbekistan produced local-language adaptations of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights for children. Centres in Lima, Madrid and Panama City cooperated with local non-governmental organizations in publishing the Spanish text of the Universal Declaration in Braille. Many other information materials were also made available on the information centres' Web sites which, in early 1999, were maintained by information centres in Antananarivo, Athens, Beirut, Bonn, Brussels, Buenos Aires, Copenhagen, Islamabad, Lisbon, London, Mexico City, Panama City, Prague, Paris, Rome and Tokyo; United Nations information services in Bangkok and Geneva; and the United Nations Office in Belarus. Several other Web sites were under construction.

15. The special session of the General Assembly devoted to countering the world drug problem together, held in June 1998, provided yet another opportunity for the information centres to publicize the diversity and relevance of United Nations activities. In addition to having fact sheets and information notes prepared at Headquarters translated into local languages and widely disseminated, the centres produced feature articles and published news supplements in cooperation with local and national newspapers.

16. Press conferences were held in partnership with the United Nations International Drug Control Programme (UNDCP) and local non-governmental organizations prior to and during the special session. Special media briefings were organized by the centres in Santa Fé de Bogota, Yangon and Washington, D. C., with participation by the Executive Director of UNDCP. The United Nations Information Centre in Mexico City also organized a satellite video conference connecting 50 journalists from Central America and Mexico with the Executive Director of

UNDCP, who spoke from Vienna. United Nations information centres were instrumental in arranging for national print and broadcasting media coverage of the special session, including several co-productions undertaken in partnership with local broadcasters. The public service announcement entitled "The cleaning lady", dubbed by United Nations information centres into 13 local languages, was widely disseminated. In Japan, for example, it was aired three times a day for one month, free-of-charge, on a giant screen at one of the busiest commuter hubs in Tokyo, giving an estimated 370,000 daily travellers the opportunity to view it.

17. Throughout the year, the information centres also continued to help draw public attention to the United Nations system-wide activities for economic and social development everywhere. A majority of information centres assisted with the launch of key United Nations development-related publications, including the reports on economic and social development published by the regional commissions, annual *Human Development Report* produced by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of the first United Nations Decade for the Eradication of Poverty (1997–2006) (A/53/329), involving press briefings and media interviews. Other information centres, including those in Antananarivo, Colombo, Dakar, Dhaka, Maseru, New Delhi and Tehran as well as the United Nations Office in Azerbaijan arranged journalist's tours to publicize United Nations development projects. Many centres also held local and regional seminars to examine development strategies.

18. In addition to having the information materials on development issues produced by the Department of Public Information translated, the information centres published accounts of important projects and surveys. For example, the United Nations Information Centre in Warsaw produced a publication entitled *Understanding the World: A Framework for Action,* drafted during a workshop held in connection with a national student essay contest on poverty. Some centres also produced many radio and television programmes on development, while several others, including those in Cairo, Islamabad, Manila, Panama City, Port of Spain, Tunis and Washington, D. C., coordinated inter-agency information committees on development issues, resulting in more efficient and focused public outreach programmes.

IV. Staffing resources

19. The Secretary-General noted in paragraph 10 of his 1997 report[1] that "although the volume and complexity of work has increased, the number of posts available to United Nations information centres, in both the Professional and General Service categories, has been drastically reduced since the late 1980s". In fact, the number of established regular budget posts available to all United Nations information centres in 1998 was 10 per cent below the 1995 level and more than 40 per cent below the 1990 level. During the same period, four new information centres were established without additional financial implications for the regular budget. The contribution of host Governments providing extrabudgetary posts to United Nations information centres has therefore become more valuable and essential today than ever before.

20. Against this background, the centres continued to make every effort to discharge their mandated tasks. As noted in paragraph 53 of the 1997 report, they did so through "innovative approaches to their work, maximum use of the information technologies at their disposal, and staff who perform multiple tasks, in close consultation with Headquarters".

21. In addition to maintaining close contact with information centres via telephone, electronic mail and facsimile, the Department of Public Information at Headquarters relies on the computerized activity reporting system it developed in 1996 as a means of providing the centres with effective programme guidance and support. The system allows the Department to monitor programme performance, help plan for future activities and provide timely feedback and assistance to help enhance programme planning and implementation by the information centres.

22. In view of the diminishing human resources, a continuing process of professional training has assumed greater importance, whether in the use of information technology or the development of substantive knowledge. During the past year, the Department organized a training programme for reference assistants from United Nations information centres in the Americas (Mexico City, July 1998) to provide them with intensive hands-on training in electronic information retrieval and processing as well as with an opportunity to share experiences and forge stronger professional ties. Later, a four-day meeting of centre directors and other senior information staff in the field was organized at Headquarters (September 1998), focusing, among other things, on the role of information centres in making the United Nations better understood; coordination of information activities among United Nations system partners in the field; cooperation with non-governmental organizations; and effective use of new communications technology. The meeting provided an opportunity for the participants and senior officials at Headquarters to discuss

substantive policies and strategies for effective information outreach to all segments of society and also to consult with members of the Committee on Information. The Department plans to hold similar training workshops in other regions.

23. Currently, there are 34 information centres headed by a resident representative of UNDP/United Nations Resident Coordinator, including 18 integrated centres. Eight additional United Nations Offices with information components are joint offices of the Department of Public Information and UNDP headed by United Nations resident coordinators. The 1990 memorandum of understanding between the Department of Public Information and UNDP on field representation has remained the framework for cooperation at the country level. This continued cooperation has served the dual purpose of projecting a unified image of the United Nations in the field and striving for cost-effectiveness through the sharing of common services. (A separate report on the integration exercise is before the Committee at the current session.[2])

V. Financial resources

24. Funds to cover the operating costs of the information centres in 1998 were below the levels of previous years. The bulk of the operating funds are disbursed for the rental and maintenance of offices, reference libraries and meeting rooms, and for communications, as well as for acquisition and maintenance of data-processing and office equipment. Some funds are allocated for translation and printing in local languages and for travel within the areas serviced by the information centres for outreach activities.

25. By 1998, some financial restrictions imposed in late 1995 and 1996 had been eased, allowing the information centres to benefit from the supply of office and modern communications equipment. All information centres received new computers and printers. Funds were allocated to train the staff in the use of information technology and will be provided on an ongoing basis as equipment is updated. In addition, funds will be made available for staff development and for regional workshops organized by the Department of Public Information.

26. In 1998, the level of extrabudgetary funding did not reach the levels achieved in earlier years. However, it should be pointed out that financial assistance provided by several host Governments has been invaluable to the information centres and their continued operation. In addition to annual financial contributions received from Governments, more than 30 Governments continue to provide information centres with rent-free premises. Some Governments provide extrabudgetary posts, while others provide ad hoc contributions for funding special information projects within the mandate of the information centres. All these contributions are greatly appreciated. The annex to the present report provides a breakdown of host Government assistance to information centres in 1998.

Notes

[1] A/AC.198/1997/6.

[2] A/AC.198/1999/3.

Annex

Allocation of resources for rental of premises and host Government assistance

Centres	*Established*	*Department of Public Information posts (1998)*	*Rental of premises in 1998 (United States dollars)*	*Host Government support*	
				Extrabudgetary staff	*Cash contribution received for 1998 (United States dollars)*
Accra	March 1958	P-4, 5 local staff	Rent-free		
Algiers[a]	September 1963	2 local staff	Rent-free		
Ankara[a]	March 1975	2 local staff	7 500		
Antananarivo[a]	January 1963	2 local staff	10 000		
Asunción[a]	October 1962	2 local staff	11 300		
Athens	April 1954	P-5, 5 local staff	55 000		48 197
Beirut	September 1962	5 local staff	Rent-free		
Bonn	January 1995	D-1, 3 local staff	Rent-free		
Brazzaville	June 1983	4 local staff	Rent-free		
Brussels	January 1975	5 local staff	70 361		63 830
Bucharest[a]	June 1970	1 local staff	Rent-free	3 local staff	51 760
Buenos Aires	November 1948	P-4, 5 local staff	Rent-free		70 000
Bujumbura	June 1961	2 local staff	Rent-free		
Cairo[a]	April 1949	5 local staff	Rent-free		1 152
Colombo[a]	August 1961	3 local staff	Rent-free		612
Copenhagen	December 1946	P-5, 5 local staff	Rent-free		
Dakar	April 1964	3 local staff	Rent-free		
Dar es Salaam	June 1961	3 local staff	Rent-free		
Dhaka	August 1981	4 local staff	4 475		3 000
Harare	November 1982	P-5, 5 local staff	Rent-free		
Islamabad	March 1951	P-4, 4 local staff	13 670		6 500
Jakarta	August 1985	P-5, 3 local staff	Rent-free		
Kabul[b]	October 1959				
Kathmandu[a]	April 1964	2 local staff	4 000		
Khartoum	October 1963	4 local staff	Rent-free		
Kinshasa[a]	July 1964	2 local staff	11 000		
Lagos	May 1967	P-5, 4 local staff	Rent-free	1 local staff	Not received for 1998
La Paz[a]	September 1963	3 local staff	6 877		Not received for 1998
Lima	April 1960	5 local staff	33 973		
Lisbon	November 1977	P-4, 3 local staff	Rent-free	2 local staff	95 677
Lomé[a]	May 1962	4 local staff	Rent-free		
London	January 1947	D-1, 7 local staff	135 000		
Lusaka	October 1975	P-5, 3 local staff	Rent-free		
Madrid	May 1986	P-5, 5 local staff	Rent-free		27 704
Managua[a]	July 1984		Rent-free		Not received since 1995

Centres	Established	Department of Public Information posts (1998)	Rental of premises in 1998 (United States dollars)	Host Government support	
				Extrabudgetary staff	Cash contribution received for 1998 (United States dollars)
Manama	November 1977		Rent-free	3 local staff	33 000
Manila	August 1953	4 local staff	Rent-free		
Maseru[a]	February 1979	3 local staff	Rent-free		
Mexico City	August 1947	P-5, 5 local staff	91 100		1 125
Monrovia[b]	October 1950				
Moscow	April 1948	D-1, 5 local staff	41 140		
Nairobi	August 1974	3 local staff	12 660		
New Delhi	January 1947	D-1, 5 local staff	Rent-free		
Ouagadougou	April 1982	P-4, 5 local staff	Rent-free		
Panama City[a]	September 1984	2 local staff	Rent-free	3 local staff	
Paris	March 1947	D-1, P-3, 8 local staff	Rent-free		8 400
Port of Spain	January 1962	P-4, 4 local staff	28 646		1 932
Prague	December 1947	P-4, 4 local staff	Rent-free		25 000
Pretoria	March 1996	P-5, 3 local staff	Rent-free		
Rabat	December 1962	5 local staff	20 000		6 145
Rio de Janeiro	March 1947	P-5, 5 local staff	Rent-free		Not received since 1992
Rome	July 1958	D-2, 5 local staff	Rent-free		
Sana'a	April 1994	2 local staff	Rent-free		
San Salvador[b]	July 1960				
Santa Fé de Bogota	May 1954	5 local staff	55 649		80 000
Sydney	November 1948	P-5, 5 local staff	49 000		
Tehran	May 1950	P-4, 2 local staff	16 000		
Tokyo	April 1958	D-1, 7 local staff	196 610		150 000
Tripoli	January 1980		Rent-free	3 local staff	Not received for 1998
Tunis	May 1960	P-5, 3 local staff	Rent-free		
Warsaw	August 1995		Rent-free	3 local staff	49 549
Washington, D.C.	October 1946	D-1, P-4, 6 local staff	157 145		
Windhoek	October 1992	3 local staff	Rent-free		
Yangon[a]	June 1959	4 local staff	Rent-free		
Yaoundé	October 1965	4 local staff	Rent-free		

[a] Integrated centres.

[b] Not operational.